

Sharing Our Marianist Stories Ep. 7 Transcript

Go to Europe, Become a Sister (with Sr. Marie Abmayr, FMI, Patti Gehred, and Gabby Bibeau)

**00:00 - Sr. Marie Abmayr, FMI**

Since I was a good student and I tried to be a good person and all that, everybody thought I should be a sister. But if they think, “I should be a sister,” - this is high school - “If they thought I should be a sister, they could forget it. I'm not doing it.” What you think and what God thinks are two different things so...

**00:31 - Patti Gehred**

Welcome to *Sharing Our Marianist Stories*. I'm Patti Gehred.

**00:35 - Gabby Bibeau**

And I'm Sr. Gabby Bibeau. What you'll hear in this podcast is Sr. Marie Abmayr telling her early vocation story of how she became a Marianist Sister. And particularly, she'll talk about her experience of going to Texas to meet the Sisters, going to Dayton for a little while to get to know the Sisters, and then finally doing her Novitiate in Spain, which in those days was quite an adventure.

**01:07 - Patti Gehred**

I was very happy and excited to hear that you were interviewing Sr. Marie Abmayr about her choices to become a Marianist Sister and the fact that she was one of the first Marianist Sisters. In fact, a question I do have, is she the first Marianist Sister?

**01:26 - Gabby Bibeau**

She was not the first Marianist Sister for the United States Foundation, but she was definitely one of the first. The history of it is a little bit complicated. Many people know that the Marianist Brothers and Priests came here around 1849. Few people know that the Marianist Sisters did not come to the United States until 1949, so that's 100 years later. So, what's cool about that is we have more living people who were part of that history of that foundation here, and Sr. Marie is definitely part of that.

**02:08 - Gabby Bibeau**

And because the story is sort of complicated in parts and is very chronological, you'll hear interjections from me in different parts of the podcast to help provide some context for what Marie says because she doesn't necessarily explain everything. And so, if we don't give a little context, it's very easy to get lost or confused. So, here's Sr. Marie Abmayr telling parts of her vocation story, and we hope that you enjoy and learn something too.

**02:47 - Sr. Marie Abmayr, FMI**

I'm from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and I grew up in a normal Catholic family. I had three brothers and one sister. And in grade school, we had the School Sisters of Notre Dame. In high school, I went to a Benedictine school, St. Benedict's Academy, and then, of course, we had Benedictine Sisters. We had an all-boy's school that was within walking distance of where we lived. The school was North Catholic [High School]. My brother George, who's two years older than I am, started, and he was there until he was a sophomore.

**03:33 - Sr. Marie Abmayr, FMI**

But I was still in grade school when I graduated from 8th grade. He had decided that he wanted to belong to the Society of Mary, and he wanted to become a Priest. So, he decided then to come to Dayton and to go to Mount St. John, where they had what was called then the Postulate. So, he went there. And then, through that, we got to know the Brothers a little bit better.

**04:05 - Sr. Marie Abmayr, FMI**

And I, of course, in the meantime, since I was a good student, and I tried to be a good person and all that, everybody thought, "I should be a Sister or like." But if they think, "I should be a Sister," - this is high school - "If they thought I should be a Sister, they could forget it. I'm not doing it." What you think and what God thinks are two different things. So...

**04:30 - Gabby Bibeau**

After her brother George left home to become a Marianist, Sr. Marie's parents became Affiliates. That's a type of Lay Marianist commitment. At their affiliation ceremony, Marie and her family met the Superior General of the Society of Mary, who leads all the Marianist Brothers in the world.

**04:50 - Sr. Marie Abmayr, FMI**

My parents were received back in 1948. The General Administrator, the General Father, "Good Father" he was called, was from the United States. His name was Sylvester Juergens. When they became Affiliates, there was a ceremony and all that. And Fr. Juergens was going in and stopping in, You know how they quote - this is my word, I don't know if it's a word or not - but "Table hop?" And then go say "Hello," and he was very good at that. Well, anyway, he came to the table where we were. I don't know what happened. I don't know if I said something - probably did - and introduced myself...

**05:33 - Sr. Marie Abmayr, FMI**

The next morning - this happened on a Sunday Monday morning - I got a phone call from the Brothers. One of the Brothers called and said that "Fr. Juergens was wondering if I would like to go and talk to him?" If he had called about five minutes later, I'd have been gone. And that was the year I was teaching. I taught 4th grade at a parish School. And I used to go out to the school

by streetcar, and usually, I left the house by 7:10 to get the first streetcar. But I wasn't gone. I was still there, probably trying to fly out of the house. And for probably a few minutes, I almost said, "No." But then I guess I figured, "Well, we can't lose anything," or I don't know what I thought. But anyway, I did. I went to talk to Fr. Juergens.

#### **06:34 - Gabby Bibeau**

Marie didn't know this before meeting Fr. Juergens, but the Marianist Sisters in Spain were about to start a community in the United States beginning in Texas. Fr. Juergens was helping the Sisters recruit American women for the new foundation.

#### **06:49 - Sr. Marie Abmayr, FMI**

We talked - this is kind of funny, I think - we talk mostly about marriage, because he said, "If you are not going to get married, okay. But if you are and you're still thinking about religious life, you have to know what is the difference between married life and religious life. What are some of the good things and not-so-good things about married life and not-so-good things and good things about religious life?" So, I guess we probably talked about an hour. You see, I had said, "Well, if there were Sisters like the Brothers, *maybe* I'd become a Sister." He said, "Oh yeah, there were Sisters coming and they were going to go to Texas."

#### **07:34 - Gabby Bibeau**

Fr. Juergens explained that the Sisters weren't coming to Texas for another year. However, at that moment, there were some other Marianist Sisters from Europe living in Dayton temporarily as they studied at the university. So, he had an idea for her.

#### **07:52 - Sr. Marie Abmayr, FMI**

Then he suggested that maybe that in the summertime, I could maybe go down to UD and take a course or two because three sisters were going to come over to United States to start a foundation in Japan. But they were coming to the United States to learn the American system of education, so that then they would be better prepared. And his suggestion was in order to meet the Sisters. Now, with them was a young woman from Hawaii. This is Sr. Laola Hironaka. She's a very gifted, interesting person.

#### **08:44 - Gabby Bibeau**

Laola ended up being the very first American Marianist Sister. She knew Marianist Brothers in Hawaii, and they encouraged her to become a Sister. This was after she was crowned as Miss Hawaii, by the way. She was doing her Postulancy with the Sisters in Dayton, then going to France for her Novitiate. She later on in life did important work for Amnesty International, working closely with people like Bono. Yeah, the Bono. He called our house in San Antonio one time wanting to talk to Laola. I think the Sister who answered the phone thought it was a prank call. I never met her. She died in 2009, but there are a lot of great stories about her.

**09:33 - Sr. Marie Abmayr, FMI**

So, she was going to come with her three sisters, and then she was going to go on to France whenever the school term ended. And then to that, I came to that at the end of the summer school. I go home because I said, "If I don't know for sure, I can't go to Europe because if I don't know and don't like it, what am I going to do?" We were going to have to go to Europe because we didn't have permission yet to start a formation program. And we would go to Spain because we would get some roots of the Spanish language because, we were going to work in Somerset and that was this little parish that was outside of San Antonio.

**10:16 – Gabby Bibeau**

She wanted to live with these Sisters in Texas for a while before she took the trip to Europe for Novitiate. In this next part, Marie talks about what it was like going to Texas for the first time. Also, you should know that at this point, I'm interviewing Marie in the activities room at her nursing home, so that background noise that you'll hear, that's a couple of ladies setting up for their bingo game.

**10:44 - Sr. Marie Abmayr, FMI**

I told my mother, "If I don't go and I get married, I will always say, 'Well, maybe I should have.'" I was 19. I wouldn't say it was exactly scared, but yeah, I sort of was because you didn't fly. That was way too expensive. But I had to go by train. My parents got a roomette for me in the train. You went on smaller trains, and then when you got to St. Louis, they connected all of these onto this train that was going to Texas. And then, as they got closer, some would go off to Texarkana. Some went off to I don't know where, I don't remember. So, little by little, they kind of broke off until the car that I was in was practically the last car. And I thought, "Oh my gosh, where are we going?" I mean, this was long. This thing was so long. Then we went. Fr. [William] Lamm and the Sisters met me.

**11:54 - Gabby Bibeau**

Father Lamb was the Marianist Priest who helped the Sisters start their new foundation. The Sisters had jobs teaching at a school and church he helped build outside of San Antonio.

**12:06 - Sr. Marie Abmayr, FMI**

I didn't realize, let's put it that way... Texas was like hot, hot, hot.

**12:14 - Gabby Bibeau**

Was that your initial reaction, "Oh my gosh, it's hot?" Because this would have been August?

**12:21 - Sr. Marie Abmayr, FMI**

October, and I had a coat on! It was a summer coat, but I was wearing what we were supposed to wear. Now this, you remember, was 1949. So then, we went out to Somerset. This was this little - I call it "a little two-bit town" outside of San Antonio. And I think there were supposed to be about 600 people in the town. There were four churches or five churches, one of them Catholic, but it's very Baptist, very Baptist.

**12:58 - Gabby Bibeau**

Apparently, as Marie tells me, Somerset was so rural that it didn't even have drinkable water. After spending a year with the three Spanish sisters in Somerset, teaching classes in catechism at the parish, Marie decided that she was ready to continue her formation as a Sister. Marie would become a novice in Huarte, Spain, and to get there in those days, you had to travel by boat.

**13:26 - Sr. Marie Abmayr, FMI**

I went over in July with another young lady who was also interested who was also a Postulant, too. This was Dolly Crocco, and... I think she was from Iowa. Okay, so we went over. We went third class, which is to be expected, but it wasn't bad. So, when we got to the house, I guess we were shown our rooms. And then I don't really remember those first few hours of the like. I don't even remember maybe the first day or so. You know, we went, ate, etc.

**14:15 – Sr. Marie Abmayr, FMI**

The Novitiate in Spain was poor. The Spanish people still had not really recovered fully from their Civil War. So, even though that was a number of years ago, and they didn't get any help in the Second World War. So, between those two things, they didn't always have – Like, they didn't have a lot of different kind of fruits and the like. They raised some of their own pigs, but then they slaughtered them. And so, we ate the pigs that they raised, and all chickens. Yeah, everybody has chickens. That's standard, I guess.

**14:53 - Sr. Marie Abmayr, FMI**

When you became a Novice, you wore a wedding gown. I think what they did was they collected bridal gowns, and if possible, you had your Godmother there. Now, I didn't have a Godmother over there. So, they got this lady for me who was very nice. Her name is Maria Teresa [Aloé?], I think, and I have a picture somewhere of her with me. But she was very nice, very nice. Gave us delicious little cookies or cupcakes, something like that.

**15:32 - Sr. Marie Abmayr, FMI**

The day that I received a habit, that was a big day. As a Novice, we had just the plain white veil. When we became a professed Sister, then we received a black veil. Our winter habits were woolen, black wool, that the one Sister [name inaudible] every year, she'd take the whole thing

apart, wash all the pieces. There weren't that many pieces, but washed all of them. And then sewed them back together again.

#### **16:04 - Gabby Bibeau**

Marie starts to tell me what a typical day was like at the Novitiate in Huarte. From this, you can start to see some of the cultural differences she encountered on top of language difficulties.

#### **16:16 - Sr. Marie Abmayr, FMI**

Well, we would have morning prayers, and I guess Mass. Yes, so it was morning prayers and Mass, morning prayers probably right before Mass and then Mass. And then we must have had breakfast. And then we helped. We did dishes and stuff like that. And then we went out and worked in the garden. Their garden was large for a garden, and so we helped to weed and to do all those, carry sticks for the beans, and then put the sticks away after the beans were grown and... We used to carry and take a basket for when we pick beans. So that all went into the basket. And then – now, my year didn't do this, but the other years - they had to pickup rocks from throughout the garden area because it was rocky. But we didn't have to do that. We missed that one. But... I think, we had to carry the dirt. We used the dirt for the manure. I'm not sure which of those, all of which for me was very new. I mean, I was never on a farm enough to amount to anything. So, I was definitely not a farm girl. I was definitely a city girl.

#### **17:48 – Sr. Marie Abmayr, FMI**

So, we would do that, and then I guess we came in. I think the main meal was at noon, and I remember - see, they would eat a whole [meal.] It looked to me like this whole big soup dish, (you know, the kind that are flat) of potatoes. And I remember thinking to myself, “Well, they may be able to eat all that, but I won't.” By the time I left there, I was, but that was their main meal. Didn't have meat, hardly ever, except for the Americans. They had mercy on us. And so, we usually had a little bit of meat and a few little things like that that would help us be not quite so away, not quite so far from our homes.

#### **18:45 - Sr. Marie Abmayr, FMI**

And then in the afternoon, we did take a lie down, I think, for, you know, for a little while, for a siesta. And then we were back to classes studying. And both Dolly and I took piano lessons. That worked out okay. It really did, because then when we came back, when I came back, I had to play the organ in Somerset. I didn't know how to play an organ, but I knew how to play a piano. So that works. We didn't eat supper until probably about between 7:00 and 8:00, might have been as late as 8:00 most of the time, I'm not sure. I know that their evening meals in Spain are later than they are over here. And then we went to bed.

**19:35 - Sr. Marie Abmayr, FMI**

That was about it. They had a dormitory. Dolly and I slept in a room where there were just two of us in the room that we had. They weren't very big, but they weren't that little either, as far as I can remember. Besides, you weren't supposed to have that much stuff. And going all the way across the ocean, we didn't have that much stuff. Eventually, the second year, when we got to the second year, and it was getting close for us to make vows, that's when Dolly decided to leave. She left about June. See, we didn't profess until September. And then I had a chance to go to Madrid so that I would get to see a few things before I went back. So, I saw the [Museo Nacional] El Prado. I saw the Basilica. I can't remember what the name of the Basilica was, and on the ship, I came back by myself.

**20:35 Gabby Bibeau**

In 1952, Marie returned to Somerset, Texas, now with temporary vows. She began teaching again at the school. She would go on to become principal at a different school. The Sister's foundation was growing as more American women joined. In later years, Marie would be a school librarian until she retired in the mid-2000s. She also volunteered part-time here at NACMS. In 2012, she celebrated her Diamond Jubilee. That's 60 years of religious profession. When I asked her to say a bit more about what she learned from those early years of religious life, she reflected more on her time in Spain.

**21:23 - Sr. Marie Abmayr, FMI**

Going into another country like that and not really understanding, - trying, but not understanding - I think they should help us when we are with people over here who do not know English. I remember how it was. Remember the day that you felt like you were this most stupid person in the world, or you were so frustrated you couldn't say the word because you didn't know what it was. I mean, I think that to have a better understanding, and maybe sympathy or empathy or whatever, for a person who does not know English, it's very important for our country. So, I would say that for sure, that's one of the things that I think was most important about going to Europe, becoming a Religious over there, coming back, and so on. Helps you to be open, I think.

**22:34 - Patti Gehred**

After I listen to the whole interview, I just think of young Sr. Marie growing up in Pittsburgh, and first she takes that train ride. I love how she tells that story, and now the next thing you know, she's on a boat. I mean, how adventurous did those first American Sisters have to be?

**22:54 - Gabby Bibeau**

And that's something that still amazes me, because for many people, just going from Pittsburgh to middle of nowhere, Texas is a lot. And it was a lot for her. But then going from that to taking an actual boat to Europe where they speak a different language, you know, it's a different culture, is amazing to me. And I asked Marie about that. And she's really funny, because she just was

like, “Well, that's how it had to be, so that's how it had to be.” You know, like it was very matter-of-fact, kind of an attitude of like, “Well, if this is what we have to do, then all right.”

### **23:32 - Patti Gehred**

I did stop and ask myself where have I been courageous in my life? I can say I was never as courageous as Sr. Marie was, and I certainly wouldn't have been at 19. But this interview challenged me to what can I do now and has me reflecting back on to have I listened as carefully and trusted where I felt God was calling me.

### **23:58 - Patti Gehred**

And if I could, I'd like to share a Sr. Leola's story. Because you had mentioned, unfortunately, you hadn't had a chance to meet her, and I did get to meet her. And even though she was older, she just had a very vibrant personality. And when we were talking, she just happened to say, “Well, when I was talking to Bono, I said, you know, you need to slow down. You need to get some rest.” And I just sort of looked at her and went, “Bono?! Are we talking the same Bono?” And yes, of course, she was in contact with Bono because of some of their work they did together. And when I was there, we were talking, and I had mentioned that my daughter was in Jazz Band, and she told me that before she joined [the FMI], she had dated the drummer from the Woody Herman Jazz Band.

### **24:44 - Gabby Bibeau**

Yeah, I hear stories about Laola a lot from different people, and she loved jazz. Even when she was in her 80s, sometimes she would go out and listen to live jazz at different places. So yeah, when Marie describes her as an interesting, gifted person, I think that covers it.

### **25:08 - Patti Gehred**

So, I just loved her stories and I think it just shows the diversity of the Marianist Sisters.

### **25:14 - Gabby Bibeau**

Yeah, that's definitely true. So, we hope that you enjoyed this episode of *Sharing Our Marianist Stories*. If you'd like to know more about the Marianist charism or about the Marianist Sisters, go to our website at [www.nacms.org](http://www.nacms.org). And if you enjoyed this podcast, please tell your friends and invite them to subscribe on iTunes or Stitcher or listen to it from our website.